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Relativity

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RELATIVITY

In college I took a course in the philosophy of science. The professor, who held a degree in physics, spent half the quarter lecturing about Einstein, Heisenberg, quantum mechanics, going over formulae, drawing little pictures of men on trains, of men in rockets, of photons striking or not striking or zipping through an imaginary hole in an imaginary plate. For the first time I understood something about physics. For the only time, and I went around campus seeing things in a new light. Pouring coffee into my styrofoam cup seemed an amazing act. Light fell thickly or not thickly on the carpet that kept making itself improbably green. I understood things that I have not understood since. Not the old $E=MC^2$, the sort of thing one sees on television game shows where the answer in the form of a question please is "What did Einstein say?" but something deeper, at once more mundane and more magical. But, of course, it was already out there, in the movies and books, in the solos Charlie Parker played as he backed us into the 20th century we were already in the middle of. In the gold space suits these dancers wear on this TV show and in the flannel shirts my friends wear against the future. In the way this poem can veer from Einstein to the photograph of a Yapese villager wearing a Budweiser can headdress to the newspaper article I have tacked to my wall: "Four Glued Down Before Stickup," in which a man enters Wayne's Bait & Tackle in Osage, Missouri, sticks four people to the floor with an industrial-sized tube of fast-drying glue, and steals an undetermined amount of cash. "John got up first," John's wife told the reporter. "He was glued on the hands and between the eyes. You could see it running down his cheeks. It only took a few minutes to get free. When you're *sacred*," the article said, "you can do anything." Of course, she meant *scared*, but the

typesetter had a hangover or too many cups of coffee, or the proofreader was having trouble with her boyfriend, whom she suspected was "seeing" a friend of a friend, a woman she'd despised since she first saw her place her impeccably manicured hand under her blonde hair and lift it—in a gesture she'd seen too often on television—flirtatiously off her shoulder at a football game in Perryville. Of course she meant *scared*, but it came out *sacred*, as it does in the Old Testament, or in that little rocket ship travelling at the speed of light, in which the diminutive man grows old watching his tiny wife and tinier children stand on the launch pad, motionless, frozen in the sad yet hopeful postures of farewell, knowing that they have already escaped that prison of light, but unaware that his wife has already remarried, this time to a miniature alcoholic ironworker who beats her and the children until they get big enough to beat him back, that his daughter has gotten pregnant, lost the child, gotten pregnant again, divorced the accountant and married the stockbroker, that his son has lost a leg in a motorcycle accident, collected the insurance money, grown first sullen, then bitter, and drunk himself to death. But the little man puts his feet up on whatever passes for a hassock in a rocket ship and watches—for the upteenth time—a movie called *Life & Death*, knowing what his science has taught him: That he rides on the present as a hollow plastic ball will ride a fountain, that he is beyond the reach of shouts and cries, that the past will break over him disguised as the present and he will be helpless to intervene.